

Death to Sleep? Death to You: A photography series
addressing the effects of sleep deprivation for a young adult audience

Graphic Design

Juried Art Exhibition

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Problem

This photography series rose out of the question of whether the lasting harmful effects of sleep deprivation are being effectively communicated to the young adult generation of college students in America. Background research on these effects focused mainly on the work of Dr. Matthew Walker, a scientist who has devoted most of his life's work to research on sleep. He defines sleep loss as anything less than 8 hours a night, and his research reveals that sleep deprivation leads to an earlier death because of the way in which nearly every process in the body is negatively effected at significant levels (Walker). While these results are startling, the question arises to whether the results have been effectively communicated to college students, a population infamous for all-nighters and offset sleep schedules. College students often meet a discussion of this topic with a perspective of hopelessness ("college means sleep deprivation, end of story"), humor ("let me laugh at my bad habits), or most dangerously as a badge of honor ("look how late I stayed up to finish this assignment"). These three perspectives each fail to recognize that sleep deprivation could literally affect one's life expectancy, so it is this weight and implication that this project seeks to communicate visually.

Process

The visual solution involved testing different mediums to achieve the desired effect, namely that of startling imagery and a juxtaposition of visuals to communicate the effects of sleep deprivation. Several symbolic elements explored from the start included a grave, a closed eye, and other shapes represented by that simple crescent curve such as a moon, indicating the dusk of life. The first medium tested was illustration as a means of communicating sleep deprivation. However, the illustration still seemed too straightforward and even palatable for such a weighty topic. Considering the intended audience of college students led to the choice of a second medium, photography, as an opportunity to apply current trends in unsettling and “edgy” photography to a topic that would capture the eye and promote a discussion. Hence, the idea to create a well-crafted conceptual photoshoot was birthed.

Solution

This final solution involved carrying out an effective shoot communicating the weight of sleep deprivation. The original elements of a grave and closed eye were combined for the idea of shooting a young adult model asleep on a tombstone as a representation of the actual long-term effects of sleep deprivation. As a note, the researcher ensured model rested her head upon a footstone away from any actual graves as to not dishonor the deceased. Various symbolic elements were included to visually communicate sleep deprivation from several angles. First, the model wore makeup as a demonstration of a well put-together college student who often feels invincible and at the height of youth. She covered herself with a white blanket to represent the naïve nature of this perceived invincibility. The sun rests on her hair as it sets in the late afternoon to echo the shortening of her days, and holly branches intertwine above her, a tree that flourishes in the dark of winter, a stark contrast against the time when all nature is dead or in a

sleep state (Perry). To heighten the effect of sleep, the researcher placed a red scarf in front of the camera to convey a dreamlike state. The overall effect portrays an off-putting and uncomfortable portrait. Throughout the shots, the model's eyes grow droopy and glassy as she stares aimlessly off into space. The final message to college students is startling indeed, proving successful in communicating the weight of the topic and furthering the ultimate message: don't put sleep to death; it could be the death of you.

Works Cited.

Walker, Matthew. "Everything You Know About Sleep Is Wrong with Dr. Matthew Walker."

Edited by M Bodnar, *The Science of Success*, 7 Nov. 2018,

Perry, Leonard. "Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly." *University of Vermont*, 2000.